

TEACHING A COURSE ON MALE AND FEMALE SPEECH

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I. Background

In the spring of 1975, a new course appeared in the curriculum of the Linguistics Department at Montclair State College in New Jersey. The course was called Women and Language. At the time, research into the differences between the speech of men and women, and discussions of what is now widely known as 'sexist language' were fairly new and still viewed with a certain amount of skepticism. Robin Lakoff's article "Language and Woman's Place" (1973)¹ had appeared just a year before the course was proposed in 1974. At that time, an effort had to be made to legitimize the subject as being part of sociolinguistics; it was emphatically not 'just a course about sexism.' The course was offered, was extremely well received by students and was generally considered to be a success. In 1976, when a Women's Studies minor program was established, the course became a regular part of the curriculum of both the Linguistics Department's offerings and of the Women's Studies program. Gradually, the course became a study of male/female speech with a definite feminist perspective. It is offered as an elective for the Linguistics major or minor or for the Women's Studies minor; it satisfies the college 'minority' requirement and can be taken as an elective in the Humanities. There are no prerequisites for the course in either Linguistics or Women's Studies.

II. An Overview of the Course

Two seemingly unrelated areas of study are presented in this course on men, women and language; these are introduced at the very outset of the class and are interwoven throughout the semester. Students are simultaneously introduced to the subject of language and linguistics (most specifically sociolinguistics) and to feminism as a scholarly perspective. By considering these two topics side by side, we arrive at the principal questions of the course: (1) Do men and women use language differently, in what ways and why? and (2) Does our language use (or speak of) men and women differently and why? It quickly becomes apparent through a discussion of male and female roles in our culture that gender stereotypes, sexist attitudes and beliefs, etc. are reinforced by our language and that young boys and girls are encouraged, if not actually taught, to speak differently and to express themselves differently, even though they are using the same language.

The discussion about men, women and language, thus takes two different paths: one is a study of the ways in which women and men are referred to and spoken of in our culture and the other is the investigation of the speech characteristics of both women and men. In the discussion of differences between the speech of women and men, a distinction must be drawn between the perception of differences and the existence of actual differences; these need to be substantiated by empirical data.² The findings of these two lines of study are considered from the viewpoint of the different positions of women and men in our society. It is suggested that men and women have a different relationship towards their language, both in the way they use the language and in the way they are described by it.

In the first week of class, a number of introductory readings are assigned, each covering a different aspect of the material to be studied in more detail during the semester. The topics of these readings are: (1) sexism in language, (2) suggested differences between the speech of women and men, (3) the distinction between perceived and actual differences in the speech of women and men and (4) issues of feminism.³ Reading assignments and/or language exercises of various types are given each week with class discussions following the topic covered in the readings or related to the language activities. Details of these are given in III, below.

Also in the first week of class, the students' term projects are assigned; these are (1) term papers for which they collect speech samples from at least 30 informants (15 men and 15 women) in order to compare some aspect of speech and (2) language journals for which they are asked to make three or four weekly entries. Both of these are described in more detail in section IV below.

III. Specific Topics and Activities

As there are no prerequisites for this course and since it is natural to find a fairly diverse group of students taking the course, it has proven useful to spend at least one class period at the beginning of the semester outlining a number of basic concepts from Linguistics. Most important among these is the distinction between descriptive and prescriptive approaches to language, with special emphasis on language variation. When the students can situate the material of the course in the context of other types of language variation, they become more receptive to the notion of differing language forms among speakers who are members of the same speech community--individuals who the students might otherwise think speak in identical ways.

A very animated discussion revolving around definitions of feminism, sexism and power early in the semester usually sets the stage

for ongoing discussions about how these topics affect the students' lives. The goal of the course is to constantly integrate questions about power, sex-role stereotyping and sexism (against both men and women) with questions of language, verbal expression, communication strategies, etc. When a student says that men are considered to be more assertive (or aggressive), it is our job to figure out what language forms might help communicate 'assertiveness'. Pointing out that men are more apt to use imperative forms where women use interrogative forms helps concretize such notions in terms of language.

The first assignment given to students requires that they each interview five men and five women. They ask their informants whether women and men speak the same way or differently; if the informants think that there are differences, they are asked to name them. The students are told to keep track of the informants' answers and to compile a list of the differences that are suggested. These are then discussed in detail in class in order to demonstrate the incredible prevalence of beliefs about the different ways in which men and women speak. The rest of the semester can in some ways be seen as an analysis of these attitudes (about the ways in which men and women 'come across') and an investigation into the accuracy of these subjective perceptions.

Among the numerous comments that the students collect from their informants are suggestions about 'directness' or 'bluntness' of speech by men, 'verbosity' in women ('women use more words than men to say the same thing'), an overall 'politeness' and carefulness in the speech of women as compared with a more casual, less self-conscious approach to speech by men, etc. However, over and over again, people say that both men and women speak differently if they are talking with each other or with members of the opposite sex. These comments provide a natural introduction to a discussion of conversational interaction. For a second language assignment, the students monitor two conversations, each between one man and one woman, to see if they can come up with a description of the different speech behavior of the conversational participants. This assignment leads to an investigation of conversational analysis complete with a discussion of interruptions, conversation facilitators, and eventually non-verbal communication.

One of the other comments frequently made by students' informants is that men talk about men and women talk about women differently from the way they describe each other. For example, a woman rarely calls another woman 'a broad'. Observations of this sort are followed up by a detailed analysis of the various terms that exist as synonyms for *man* and for *woman*. Students compile long lists of words which are used in place of *man* and of *woman*. These are painstakingly listed on the blackboard in class; the lists are carefully compared and then scrutinized for what they reveal about our culture. This is a valuable exercise for teaching about the interaction of language and culture

since the view of woman expressed by the hundreds of terms used to describe her speaks volumes to anyone reading through such a list.

There are countless other topics which can be discussed in the course of the semester: among these are grammatical gender and natural gender, sexism in dictionaries, in texts, in the press, in the language of the law, etc., naming practices, the notion of maleness as norm with its consequences for behavior and language use, etc.

IV. Student Activities

As mentioned above, the students engage in two main projects during the course of the semester. The first of these is a journal. Students are asked to record anything they notice about male and female speech behavior, any sexist language they hear and other related observations. Most students are slow to get a feel for what it means to listen to how things are being said instead of what is being said. The distinction between form and content is not a natural one for them and it is a somewhat difficult process to get them to really hear how people talk. The journals are an important step in this process. The students list observations of sexist language, sex-stereotyped behavioral interaction and reactions to classroom discussions. Interestingly, the journals become chronicles of consciousness-raising and growing self-awareness. As an indication of the growing self-awareness, many students regularly comment about their own language and observe how it fits or breaks the sex-linked 'perceptions' listed at the beginning of the semester.

The most exciting part of the course is without a doubt the success of the students' term papers. For most students, this is a first attempt to formulate a hypothesis, establish a procedure to test it and collect data for themselves. A considerable amount of class time is spent explaining procedures to use for collecting natural speech samples, the importance of controlling as many variables as possible in their interviews, in short, how to be a linguist in the field. It turns out that the students are better at collecting data than at analyzing it, but this may be partly a consequence of the time constraints of a one semester course. Along with their linguistic analysis, they are asked to interpret their findings in light of the discussion about feminist issues and sexist attitudes of society. The results of all of the students' projects are presented in ten or fifteen minute presentations during the last few weeks of the semester.

Among the many successful and ingenious projects which have been done are the following: a study of qualifiers accomplished by holding a contest in a bar; the informants were to guess the length of the bar counter. The winner would get a free drink. (The student's cousin owned the bar!) Men consistently said such things as *It is five and a*

half feet long. Just as consistently, women said, *I'm not sure but I think it is about five and a half feet long*. The results indicated not only that women used many more qualifiers but that incidentally, their answers were more often correct. A study of request forms in a liquor store: all of the men used declaratives or imperatives, e.g. *Give me a pack of Bud, I'd like a pack of Bud*. The women used interrogatives, e.g. *Could I have a pack of Bud?* Similar results have been seen in luncheonettes, cafeterias, etc. Ways of asking for information: one frustrated student, after spending innumerable hours in museums and libraries, found that men simply avoided asking for information. She could not get as many samples of men's speech as women's. When men and women were together, it was the woman who approached the guard, etc. with the question. Another student was a switchboard operator at a hotel banquet facility. She collected approximately 500 speech samples. Most of the women calling first said *Hello* or *Hi* and then made their request; men went straight to the request. The examples go on and on. In fact, the findings are so impressive that a paper outlining the kinds of results that the students have produced is now in progress.⁴

V. Conclusion

Can a linguistics course for non-linguistics majors teach linguistics? The answer is a resounding yes. Can a course as politically volatile as one on feminism still teach anything about language? Again, the answer is an absolute yes. The requirements for this course, which include a midterm and a final exam in addition to the term project, are rigorous and occasionally stimulate complaints, but the experience is apparently a valuable and enjoyable one for the students--and an exciting one for the teacher as well.⁵

NOTES

¹Robin Lakoff's article "Language and Woman's Place" first appeared as an article in *Language in Society*, 2.45-80. A revised version of this appeared in book form in 1975 *Language and Woman's Place*, Harper and Row.

²The point about the difference between perceived and actual speech differences is best made by Cheri Kramarae. She discusses aspects of this distinction in a variety of places. See for example, Kramer, 1977, "Perceptions of Female and Male Speech," *Language and Speech*, 20.151-161.

³A number of different readings are possible for this introduction. One suggestion is the section on "Language and Sexism" in Gary Goshgarian's *Exploring Language*, 1977, Little, Brown and Co. The

section includes an article by Miller and Swift on sexism in language, an article by Lakoff suggesting some differences between men's and women's speech and an article by Kramer outlining the difference between perceptions and actual differences in speech. The introduction to a good anthology on feminism or women's issues serves well as a beginning point for a discussion on feminism. For example, the introduction to *Woman in Sexist Society*, Gornick and Moran, 1971 has worked well.

⁴Forthcoming, Freed, A.F., "Actual Differences in Male and Female Speech."

⁵Suggested texts for such a course are Thorne and Henley (eds.), *Language and Sex*, 1975, Newbury House and *Sexism and Language*, Nilsen, Bosmajian, Gershuny, and Stanley (eds.), 1977, National Council of Teachers of English. Other readings are needed to supplement and update these collections.